LAMENT FOR A CITY

February 19, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Jeremiah 22:1-5
Luke 13:31-35

"O Jerusalem, O Jerusalem... How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"
-Luke 13:34 (RSV)

I love the approaches. There is a point on the Kennedy Expressway coming in from O'Hare Airport, around the North Avenue or Division Street exit, when on a clear night or bright, clear day - the city looms up, with startling, dramatic clarity. Or from the south on the Dan Ryan there is a specific point around 20th or 22nd Street when you come up around a long turn and suddenly there it is. Or on Lake Shore Drive from the South, driving around the Aquarium onto the lake front straight-away. I love the approaches to this city. They are, I think, breathtakingly beautiful. I love them so much I sometimes create a reason to go out and look at them. I volunteer to drive people to the airport because of the reward at the end of the trip. We were away from the city for a full month one time and on the first evening back we drove up and down the Outer Drive, wide-eyed. The approaches inspire me. A verse of Scripture often comes to mind...

> "And I saw the holy city, new
> Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven
> from God, prepared as a bride, adorned
> for her husband."

- and I think, "that must be what she will look like."

Now let me suggest that if you're going to try this field trip you do it at sometime other than rush hour. The picture loses something, when for twenty minutes you've been at a dead standstill at 5:15, sandwiched between two semi's and the temperature out there is 96 degrees.

I love the approaches from the air, another whole genre of urban beauty. I used to love to approach Columbus, Ohio out of the west on Route 70. You come up over a hill about three miles outside and see it. And I know the exact point on the Kettle Road down out of Brush Mountain when on a clear night, the gray, gritty reality of a railroad town in Pennsylvania looks like a jewel, nestled securely in its safe valley.

I've always imagined that Jesus of Nazareth felt the same way... loved the city... knew the exact moment on the road up, because Jerusalem is on a rise, actually, when the picture comes into focus and the reality of the city encounters your senses. Once, the very thought of the city filled him with such emotion that he wept. He was determined to go there, apparently. He was, I like to imagine, as enthralled with his city as those of us who choose to live here are enthralled with ours. So I listen carefully when he talks about the city, which he does a lot. I am deeply moved by his feelings about the city, and in the sense that his whole public ministry seems, in a way, to be pointed toward the city, I am compelled to attention by this melancholy incident which presents itself to us as he moves toward his city and his cross - on the second Sunday of Lent.

Friendly Pharisees (not all Pharisees were uptight moralists; some liked him a lot) warn Jesus that the King is looking for him, wants to kill him. King is actually much too grand. He was called a Tetrarch, which means he ruled over a portion of an old Kingdom. He was really just a puppet, one of those despicable quislings who are willing to compromise with the real power, which was Roman, in order to hold onto the perks and trappings of power exercised at the expense of his own people, the Jews. Herod Antipas was his name, a notorious womanizer, detested by the Judeans. He had ordered the execution of John the Baptist because John had the nerve to call attention to his romantic activities; and now he wanted the head of another potential revolutionary and trouble maker. So some Pharisees warned Jesus.

Jesus' response is to call Herod a Fox, a term of contempt, reiterate his determination to go to Jerusalem anyway, and then a small soliloquy, a heart breakingly poignant lament...

> "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets
> and stoning those who are sent to you! How
> often would I have gathered your children as
> a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but
> you would not!"

That's a privileged moment... an opportunity to know something of our Lord's private feelings of love for the city. What a lovely image he used, an altogether feminine image of God as mother hen, gathering, bearing, nurturing, protecting her chicks under her wings...

There is strength here too. Those prophets who were killed didn't get in trouble for asking people to be nurturing. They never got stoned to death for preaching eloquent sermons on the advantages of monotheism or the ten steps to peace of mind in the city. The prophets whose memory Jesus evokes here, and in whose tradition he clearly sees himself, had the obnoxious propensity of confronting the political powers with God's uncompromising commitment to justice. Jesus' lament is precisely because the city cannot bear the truth telling of God's spokespersons. The prophet bangs on the door of the city council chambers and demands housing, food and health care for the poor and the King always says something like "who let him in here?" and "get rid of him."

Jesus, caught up in his deep love for the city, couldn't get Jeremiah out of his mind. God ordered Jeremiah to go directly to the King, tell him this for me -

> "do justice...
> deliver the oppressed from their oppressors...
> do no wrong to the aliens, the orphans
> and widows, i.e. the powerless and
> disenfranchised...
> shed no innocent blood...
> Do this and things will go well for you.
> But if you don't, this house shall become
> a desolation."

There is in the Bible this embarrassing directness of the prophets which consistently calls to account the politicians. Just as consistently it gets the prophets stoned to death, or at least ridiculed and banished from places where decisions are made, not invited back to the meeting.

It is a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition we would like to forget, particularly those of us who live in the midst of the larger-than-life realities of a modern American city. But it's there in the tradition, not because some liberal social theorists dragged it in, not because all the church leaders are closet Marxists. It's there because of Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Jesus. The Christian faith is more than a simple prophetic confrontation with the body politic. But the faith loses something absolutely essential to its integrity, its faithfulness - when it forgets the prophetic, and convinces itself that its job is to tend to the souls of men and women and let someone else worry about their bodies and minds. The God of the Bible cares about the state of the individual's soul, but also about the corporate soul of the city; that, inevitably, means politics and the market place.

In the early part of this century an American Baptist pastor in Hell's Kitchen, New York recovered the connections and the prophetic tradition and wrote A Theology for the Social Gospel"... which reminded American Christianity that a Social Gospel is the only kind of Gospel there is. Walter Rauschenbusch was his name and he very much influenced the shape of church and culture through the lives and witness of people like Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement; Jane Addams, who founded Hull House and was on the edges of this congregation at times; and Martin Luther King, Jr. King, of course, was a figure very much in mold of a Biblical prophet and before he was killed in a city, he said:

> "It has been my conviction - that any
> religion that professes to be concerned
> about the soul of man and is not
> concerned about the social and economic
> conditions that scar the soul, is a
> spiritually moribund religion only
> waiting for the day to be buried..."

Or, we may now add, waiting for television to make it profitable, or the new narcissism to assure us all that all that matters is that "I get mine,"

or the theological narcissism which assures us that the only real religious issue is the state of my soul, whether I'm going to heaven and if I can feel good about myself...

Jesus, lover of the city, lamented that the city turns a deaf ear to prophetic truth-telling - and that lament continues to stir my conscience.

Robert F. Kennedy was making a speech one time in Trenton, New Jersey, not far from the barracks where the Hessian soldiers stayed during the Revolutionary War, and where they got caught partying by George Washington on Christmas Eve. Facing a terrible city slum, he quoted the poet,

"This is not what we intended,
This is not what we intended at all."

Things do not always work out the way we hope or intend here. The city, in fact, seems to free both the worst and the best about us. Now, no stereotypes please. No generalization about organized crime, dirt, noise and impersonality. Where else, after all, can you go to sleep every night listening to the comforting clip-clop of horses' hooves, other than Michigan Avenue? Where else do your immediate choices include a twenty mile bike ride on a lake front, or a subway ride to a ball game? Or where else in ten minutes in one direction is the world's finest collection of lowland gorillas and ten minutes in the other, Claude Monet and the world's best impressionists?

In the frontispiece to his love song to the city, Nelson Algren borrowed the words of Baudelaire (about Paris):

"I love thee, infamous city!"

No stereotypes of our infamous history, please. We returned from two weeks in Bavaria last July and took a walk on the lake front. We realized as we saw, bumped into and smelled the picnic odors from and heard the accents of Asian Americans, African Americans, Spanish speaking Americans, that we had just visited a homogeneous part of the world. For two weeks we had seen no one who did not look exactly like us. We talked about our gratitude, that for all its obvious short comings in the area of race relations - its occasional outbursts of anti-Semitism, or white racism or black racism - at least this city is having a go at the idea of a truly inclusive human community.

No urban stereotyping, please.

In Robert Fulghum's enormously popular little book, All I Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten, he writes about a man who set out to test the widely held proposition that city people will rip you off if you're not careful. He decided to try the real acid test - New York City cab drivers. "He posed as a well-to-do foreigner with little knowledge of English. His friends predicted that most cab drivers would take advantage of him in some way... But, just one out of thirty-seven cheated him. The

rest took him directly to his destination and charged him correctly. Several refused to take him when his destination was only a block or two away, even getting out of their cabs to show him how close he already was. The greatest irony of all was that several drivers warned him that New York City was full of crooks and to be careful." [p. 59-60]

No stereotypes, please. It may not be the whole truth, but at least a portion of the truth is that much of the time we live in a safe, clean community of caring people. Of course, not all of us do. There are little children not far from here who have never seen the lake, don't know they live in Chicago for that matter.

The other part of the truth, of course, is that the city brings out the worst as well as the best. And followers of Jesus need, at least to emulate his honesty. Part of the vocation of an urban Christian, I submit, is simply to be a truth-teller by first being a truth-seer. It is no secret that one of the ways we cope with suffering, oppression, tragedy on a grand scale, is to refuse to look at it, refuse to let it penetrate. We know that we have built-in psychological defense mechanisms which allow us to protect ourselves from the pain of indescribable suffering. Michael Harrington caught us at it 25 years ago when in his famous book on poverty, The Other America, he pointed out that expressways prevent most of us from ever seeing the reality of poverty. So the first duty of an urban Christian and an urban church is to see honestly.

So please have the courage and the integrity to see...

Homelessness - a rampant, growing, deepening epidemic of homelessness on the streets, primarily of our cities, people living in the subway system, on buses, on sidewalk grates, in corners, using the garbage cans for food and the streets for toilets. We could deal with this if we chose to. We choose not to, mostly. We make political decisions which make the situation worse, not better. We make it virtually impossible to build affordable low cost housing-for-profit, and then wonder where all the homeless people come from. Lewis Thomas comments on the political decisions which resulted in mentally ill people by the thousands walking the streets, cared for by community based mental health clinics and group homes that don't exist, and concludes "a society can be judged by the way it treats its most disadvantaged, its least beloved, its mad. As things now stand, we must be judged a poor lot, and it is time to mend our ways." [Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, p. 100]

Please see small efforts to help: shelters funded by city and churches which do something, but do not address the deeper problem of our refusal to pay for public mental health hospitals and clinics, to make grants available and loan guarantees which enable builders to build low cost housing.

Please see small efforts to build housing, often accomplished in spite of official apathy and occasionally official opposition. Please see the federal government, in the name of ideological purity, actually suing non-profit projects which achieve racial balance and something resembling economic and social integration. Please see the federal government,

instead of sponsoring more workable projects like Atrium Village, actually taking us to court for accomplishing racial balance.

Please see Public Housing in Chicago, an acknowledged disaster, created, all now agree, by a white political structure to contain poor blacks and resulting in the most racially segregated city in the country. Home to 150,000 people, 100,000 of them children; a fertile environment for a wide range of social pathology we don't even comprehend including drugs, crime, gangs and welfare dependency. In the name of Jesus who laments the city, please see the elevators... The few which work and which are, as one report notes, the most dangerous transportation system in the country. See no lobbies, no front doors, no security - except police in squad cars, targets for snipers on the roof.

Please pray for Vincent Lane, new head of the Chicago Housing Authority, trying to bring freshness to the toughest job in town.

Read The American Millstone, "an examination of the nation's permanent underclass" by the staff of the Chicago Tribune; a permanent underclass with several generations of history and tradition, which we have created, within walking distance from North Michigan Avenue.

See a new drug culture which attracts, addicts and then employs the very young to market, sell and deliver fifty $25 bags of cocaine per day.

See the war raging two miles from here: automatic weapons fire every night, from the AK-47 assault rifles the N.R.A. has convinced the politicians everyone has a right to own; fourteen shootings in the last month at Cabrini Green...

See it, in the name of Jesus, who lamented. See it because someone must and most won't. See it because someone must do the lamenting and weeping.

But do not weep only. Do something. Invest something. Give something.

William Hudnut, Mayor of Indianapolis and Presbyterian minister, writes:

> "The church has the responsibility and
> the opportunity to be the servant and
> healer in our urban areas, and the bottom
> line for the Christian is to join the battle
> in the city and to help it become under God
> what it ought to be." [Minister-Mayor, p. 165]

What it ought to be... "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem." O Chicago, Chicago...

What difference can any one of us make? Is there any use trying? Aren't the problems so huge that it makes more sense not to get too agitated about them? That, of course, is the ultimate enemy - apathy supported by selfishness. What we cannot do is resolve the urban crisis alone. What we can do is see it, try to understand it, vote intelligently,

demand creativity and courage from the people we elect. And we can, in the name of Jesus, deal with the problems that confront us.

I always thought Dr. Bryant Kirkland, former pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, showed us how to do it. When New York was confronting its serious fiscal crisis several years ago, Dr. Kirkland announced during worship that there would be a special offering for New York and that he and Mrs. Kirkland were making the first gift. Of course it didn't balance the city budget. Nor did it address the systemic problems which caused the crisis.

All it was, was a simple and eloquent gesture of caring and commitment. There is always hope in that.

So do something hopeful. Along with many, many others, this church makes gestures of hope.

Our tutoring program will not resolve the educational crisis for poor minority children, but it is full of hope for them and for the city.

Our Habitat for Humanity program, our joint-sponsorship of Atrium Village, won't resolve the housing crisis, but they are symbols of hope.

Our Social Service Center doesn't resolve homelessness or addiction or unemployment, but it is a gesture of hope.

Biblical faith is both private and prophetic. It has to do with praying, but also caring for the poor... So your personal faith must, in a Biblical sense, have a public dimension, for your own sake, for the health of your own soul.

James Angell, an attorney now a minister, served an urban church and wrote about city dwellers, that they - we - are:

" - crowded, but lonely
- rich, but poor
- busy, but bored
- surrounded by thirty-five institutions dedicated to security - but afraid
- ignoring religion - but starved for God."
[Put Your Arms Around the City, p. 29]

The Gospel in our Lord's lament for the city... the Good News here is that our Lord Christ passionately cares about the city and about the people in it.

The Good News here is news about an amazing grace we cannot elude, even in the towering canyons of Michigan Avenue or the desperate poverty of Cabrini-Green. A grace that comes following us, a grace which encompasses the entirety of our lives and invites us to be a committed, passionate part of the healing of the city.

Nothing about us lies outside the perimeters of that grace: nothing in our life together or our most private, personal life.

The Good News here is that God loves us. The startling word in what we thought was a melancholy incident, is that this God of ours is very much like a mother hen and wants for us nothing so much as the nurturing protection of those strong wings...

That goes for all of us in this city. What a good and blessed place to be.

Amen.